

The Security of God
Luke 12:13-21
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One of the things I really admire about Jesus is that he rarely avoided the tough questions. He constantly had these very cunning religious leaders trying to trap him at every turn, and he always found a way to outsmart them. In fact, he seemed almost eager about tackling these questions head-on.

Pastors, on the other hand, aren't quite as gung-ho about it. When talking to someone about our church, I'm always a bit afraid that they're going to ask a question that really puts me on the spot. "Pastor, does your church believe that I could be reincarnated as a Twinkie?" "Uh...You know, our associate Tim majored on that very subject in seminary. I'll go get him."

Should we pay taxes to Caesar? Jesus had an answer. What is the greatest commandment? Jesus had an answer. Yet in our passage today, when this man lobs Jesus a softball question and asks him to help divide up the inheritance, Jesus says, "Who made me judge over you?"

On the surface, it's not an unusual request. In the ancient world there weren't judges and courtrooms, so often people would bring their disputes to rabbis, who were considered some of the wisest folks in society. The rabbi would arbitrate these disputes and decide one way or another. But in this case, Jesus doesn't take the case. Maybe he knew the motives here.

What's probably going on is that a man has died and his two sons are squabbling over who gets the Lexus and who gets the country club membership. This is not about fairness; it's about greed. It's sad that, in the wake of his father's death, all the man wanted was his father's stuff. And it's sad that all the father left his son was the prospect of more stuff. Jesus wants no part of enabling this man's greed.

Instead, he tells this interesting parable about a farmer who had an unexpected bumper crop. His silos and barns were already full, so he had to decide what to do with all this extra food. After a conversation with himself, he decides to build even bigger barns to hold his harvest, so he can sit back and enjoy the good life while he lives off the earnings of this windfall.

But wouldn't you know it? As soon as the man says he's going to take it easy, the rope on his hammock snapped, he tumbled down his manicured lawn, fell off his brick patio, landed in his in-ground pool and drowned. And Jesus drives home the point by saying, "This is what happens when we put our security in our crops rather than in God."

There are a couple of interesting things to notice about this farmer. First, technically he doesn't do anything wrong. He doesn't steal, he doesn't kill anyone, he doesn't cheat to get ahead. No workers are mistreated; the man is actually very careful and conservative. Jesus doesn't say the man is bad or good; he simply calls him a fool.

Jesus also doesn't scold this man for having an abundance. He doesn't chastise him for having a bumper crop. Jesus would support the owning of possessions. He didn't take a vow of poverty; he was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard, which means he had to have a way to buy his food and drink. How can we ever become responsible stewards if we never have anything for which to be responsible? We don't say to a child,

“Learn to read and then I’ll give you a book” or “Learn to swim and then I’ll put you in the water.” Now, this understanding doesn’t let us off the hook for how we deal with our possessions, but it should remove some of the guilt this passage could cause us.

So if this man doesn’t do anything wrong to get his wealth, and it wasn’t wrong for him to have it, what’s the problem here? I believe his greatest error is in how he viewed what he had. Pay attention to the pronouns here: “This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I’ll say to myself, “Self, you have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.” ’

My barns, my grain, my goods, my things. And yet what does Jesus say at the beginning of the parable? “The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop.” When you consider the amazing way that the rain and soil and seed and sunshine work together to make this crop into an abundant harvest, it’s almost comical to hear the farmer in the story speak of “I” and “mine,” as if it was through his efforts alone that the plants grew. His first mistake was not acknowledging that all good gifts do not come from our own hard work and effort; they come from God and the gifts God gave us, like our intelligence and our skills that allows us to earn a living and take care of our families.

The farmer’s next mistake was where he placed his trust and security. You would think he would have learned that there is no security in earthly things. A farmer who works the ground should know that he is at the mercy of the land, which doesn’t always produce as it should. And yet, this farmer builds bigger barns to hold his wealth, thinking his wealth would determine his security.

One day, a young man asked rich old man how he made his money. The old guy said, “Son, it was 1932. The depth of the Great Depression. I was down to my last nickel. I invested that nickel in an apple. I spent the whole day polishing the apple, then sold it for a dime. Next morning, I bought two apples, spent the day polishing those, and sold them for 20 cents. I continued this system for a month, and by the end of the month I had accumulated 1.37.”

The young guy said, “I see. So that’s how you built your empire?”

The old guy said, “No way! Then my wife’s father died and left us two million dollars.”

Earthly things like wealth and possessions come and go; they are not reliable. Who knows when, as the passage puts it, our life will be demanded of us? What good is our earthly accumulation then When that happens to this man, God says to him, “Who will get what you have prepared for yourself?” In other words, who is going to benefit from the wealth you intended for yourself? Because it certainly wasn’t going to be him.

I believe Jesus is helping his listeners pay attention to God’s will in this story. If a farmer’s fields produce abundantly, more than what he needs, it is a gift from God to be shared. God doesn’t bless us with the expectation that the blessing ends with us. God fills our cups so that we may pour out some of what we’ve received.

I spent part of my childhood in the state of Kentucky. Now, that state has received more than its share of ridicule, but here’s something very admirable about it. It is one of four states in our country that was originally known as a commonwealth – the commonwealth of Kentucky. Now think about that phrase for a second – the commonwealth. The idea that whatever I have belongs to everyone else as well, that whatever wealth I have is shared with those around me.

The farmer didn't want to live that way He equates abundant life with abundant things. He practiced what I call practical atheism. He believed in God when it worked in his favor, and didn't believe in God when it kept him from enjoying the good life, when faith just got in the way. Instead of sharing, this man wanted to hoard what he had, storing up more than he needed with the thought that full barns equaled security.

But as we all know, life is too capricious to put our trust in it. Can we really find peace of mind in anything in this world? As soon as we try, it crumbles. We build our barns on seemingly steady ground, only to find it was actually shifting sand. We put our trust in people only to be let down. We put our trust in doctors only to find they can't work miracles. We put our trust in ourselves, only to fall short. There is no true security in this world.

Instead, our security is found in God. It is found in a faith that isn't vulnerable to the whims of this life. Our security comes from our growing relationship with the One who was, and is, and is to come, the One who we call our rock and our fortress, the one who is from everlasting to everlasting.

And as we do this, we begin to build something much greater than a place to store our stuff. Jesus doesn't encourage us to avoid a life of success, but to choose a life of significance, a life which is balanced and meaningful, a life where the dominant pronouns are "we" and "our," not "me" and "mine."

What are we building? In the race to succeed, to accumulate, to give ourselves the good life, what are we building? Are we building our lives around God, or around something else? Ultimately, when we die, our stuff will be given away, whether we like it or not. Why not choose to participate in that sharing, and thus experience the joy of giving to others?

We are all wealthy, aren't we? And our wealth opens up choices for us about how we honor God and use those resources we have been given. Are we practicing faith or practical atheists? The truth is that, if we are a Christian, every day our life is demanded of us. Every day we are called to give our lives for the work of God's kingdom. So what are we building?